

Reliable Growth

BOWMAN GAS, A FIFTH-GENERATION PROVIDER OF RESIDENTIAL LPG SERVICE IN MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA, SETS THE STANDARD IN THE REGION WITH THE AID OF INDUSTRIAL PROPANE SERVICE AND BLACKMER®

By Bill Holmes



Guy Bowman, left, and his son, Kris, represent the fourth and fifth generations of Bowmans to operate Bowman Gas in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Turning to Blackmer® and its pump and compressor technologies, including LGL Series Sliding Vane Pumps (pictured), has helped Bowman Gas become a leading supplier of LPG to residents of the Central U.P.

Michigan's Upper Peninsula is one of the unique areas of the United States. Encompassing one-third of the state's land area, it is home to just 3% of the state's population. This is due in equal parts to the U.P.'s remoteness – it is bordered by three of the Great Lakes, Superior, Michigan and Huron, and accessible by land through only the far northeastern corner of Wisconsin or the Mackinac Bridge at the far northern tip of mainland Michigan – and its harsh climate. It is not uncommon for the U.P.'s first measurable snowfall to occur around Labor Day with the last drifts finally melting away around Memorial Day.

Faced with those rugged conditions, the hardy souls who choose to make the U.P. their home need a reliable source of energy to heat their residences during the course of those long, cold winters. And for more than 90 years, that energy source, often in the form of LPG, has been reliably supplied by Bowman Gas to thousands of customers who reside in an area of the central U.P. that runs from Marquette to

Escanaba – the U.P.'s two largest cities – on the west and from Paradise to Brevort on the east.

Bowman Gas, which is now in its fifth generation of family ownership, began serving the U.P. in 1918 from its headquarters in Gulliver, MI, USA, which is on the U.P.'s southern coast along Lake Michigan, as the operator of a gasoline service station. Around the time of World War II, the company found its ultimate niche when it expanded its operations and began supplying LPG for home heating to the residents of the central U.P. Currently, Guy Bowman is carrying on the family tradition as President of Bowman Gas, while his brother and sister, Jay and Kim, are also involved in the company. The next generation of Bowmans has also committed to the family business with Guy's son, Kris, and daughter, Stephanie, on hand to help carry the Bowman legacy into the future.

Expand And Conquer

From those modest beginnings, Bowman Gas has embarked on a plan of steady, thoughtful growth. This commitment



Bowman Gas transport drivers like Bob Hampton, right, optimize the LPG loading and unloading times on their routes thanks to Guy Bowman's decision to outfit his fleet with TLGLF Sliding Vane Pumps from Blackmer®.

to the business plan has gotten to the point where the Bowman Gas universe now consists of its main headquarters in Gulliver, which is housed in the same building as it was nearly 100 years ago, two additional office/bulk-plant locations in Newberry and Wetmore, which are located 50 miles to the northeast and northwest, respectively, of Gulliver, and five satellite bulk plants.

"We've done quite well in this area for a good many years," said Guy Bowman. "We're about a 95% residential customer base because there is very little commercial business in the area, and no agriculture at all."

A key decision made by Bowman Gas in its early years as an LPG supplier was to build a rail spur at the Gulliver location. This was necessary because the remoteness of its location made receiving its LPG supply via truck problematic. Adding rail service made it much easier and more efficient to get supply, something that it still takes advantage of today, while also pulling some supply via transport truck from an LPG terminal in the area that is operated by BP.

To serve its customer base, in addition to the transport for supply pickups, Bowman Gas now employs a delivery fleet of six LPG-dedicated bobtails.

As it began to grow, Bowman Gas knew that it would have to identify dependable business partners. One of those was Industrial Propane Service, Byron, MI, USA, which is located on the mainland between Lansing and Flint. Established in 1968 by Charles and Helen Vandemark, IPS is another family-run business that is operated today by Jeff

Vandemark, Charles and Helen's grandson. In its 40-plus years of operation, IPS has developed into one of Michigan's leading providers of service and equipment for the propane and anhydrous ammonia industries. In 1996, IPS was divided into two companies, IPS, which is involved in plant construction, bobtail sales and service, transport service and pumping stations, and IPS Equipment, Inc., a distributor of propane equipment whose operation is overseen by Jeff's brother, Rob, and sister Kim.

"IPS is the service company for the retail end of the business; we

do everything except sell the gas," explained Vandemark, who assumed leadership of the company in 2008. In addition to its Byron, MI, headquarters, IPS also has a warehousing facility in southern Ohio, giving it the ability to service a customer base that stretches from Wisconsin through Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

So, when Bowman Gas was looking to expand its Gulliver headquarters, it found a kindred, family-centered spirit in IPS.

"Around 20 years ago when we were looking to update the Gulliver facility, we did some research and chose IPS to do the update, and from that time on, we have had a relationship where now they do everything for us," said Bowman. "When we built the Newberry and Wetmore



Bowman Gas serves its residential customer base with a six-vehicle fleet of LPG bobtails, all of which are outfitted with sliding vane transport pumps from Blackmer®.

sites, we used them, and we've used them at every satellite plant we've added since then. They stock a tremendous amount of parts and we receive them the next day, which is a big thing because we're so far from them, about 400 miles. That also helps when we have a problem because we can use their expertise over the phone, as well. Their knowledge, knowing what could be wrong, what is wrong, is invaluable. If you have a specialized problem, they've seen it before."

A Profitable Partnership

From its early days, the Vandemarks also knew that if their business was to be successful they would also have to identify and cultivate reliable partnerships with equipment suppliers. One of the companies that has been by IPS's side since those early days is Blackmer®, Grand Rapids, MI, USA. Blackmer is a manufacturer of positive displacement sliding vane pumps, relief valves and reciprocating gas compressors.

"As long as we've been a wholesale distributor of propane equipment, we've been happy to recommend Blackmer products to our customers," said Vandemark. "That was no different when Bowman Gas was looking to upgrade and expand their operations."

To that end, the only transport pumps you'll see on Bowman's vehicles are Blackmer pumps. The same is true for the reciprocating compressor that is in constant use at the Gulliver bulk plant, which has an LPG storage capacity of 120,000 gallons. The compressor is a Blackmer Model LB601 Reciprocating Gas Compressor that replaced a competitor's model seven years ago and has been operating without a hitch ever since. The LB601 meets the needs of Bowman's railcar unloading operations because Blackmer's LB Series compressors are an oil-free design with the unique ability to do liquid transfer and also do vapor recovery after the tank's liquid is emptied. This feature maximizes the entire transfer operation. In addition, the vapor recovery process can add an equivalent of 3% capacity to every tank transfer.

"We cut our unload and vapor recovery time by three hours a day by going to the Blackmer compressor, which means less time, power charges and wear and tear on the equipment," said Bowman. "It was also easy to install because there is very little pipework, so it was basically a direct replacement. The Blackmer is also so much quieter and so much more efficient. It's been in there for seven years, and the main piping has been there for 60 years, and we're absolutely happy with the performance. We can also



The key component of Bowman Gas' LPG storage and transfer operation at the 120,000-gallon capacity storage facility at its Gulliver, MI, headquarters is a Blackmer® LB601 Reciprocating Gas Compressor, which has been operating, without fail, for seven years.

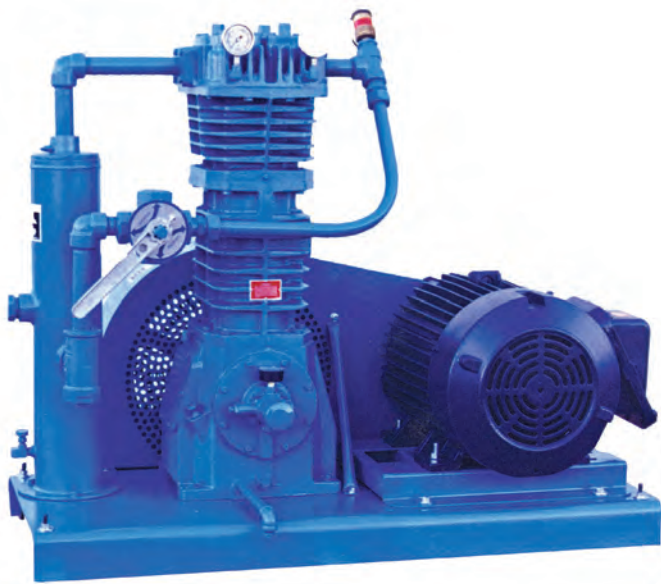
take the vapor off the storage tank, push it into the railcar, push the liquid out and when we're done, recover the vapors back, which equates to quite a few gallons on every load."

For its transport and bobtails, Bowman Gas has standardized with Blackmer's 3-inch TLGLF3 and 4-inch TLGLF4 Sliding Vane Pump models. In addition, Bowman has a total of nine LGL pumps in operation at its various bulk facilities that are used for loading and unloading operations. "The LGL Series pumps feature cavitation-suppression liners that reduce noise, vibration and wear. Other features include replaceable casing liners and end discs, ductile-iron construction with internal relief valves, self-priming and dry-run capabilities and vanes that can be replaced without removing the pump from the piping system.

"They work very well and we have had no problems with them," said Bowman. "We'll rebuild our pumps before they get bad since it's a lot easier to do preventive maintenance than waiting for something to get worn on them. We replace the vanes, seals, pins and gaskets ourselves on the truck pumps every three years, and we very seldom have to do that at the bulk plants; those pumps go forever."

Conclusion

When you spend most of the year at the mercy of Mother Nature, you need LPG transfer and delivery equipment that you can rely on. For many decades, Bowman Gas has come to know and appreciate that the equipment delivering the



Blackmer® LB Series Reciprocating Gas Compressors are ideal for Bowman Gas' railcar-unloading operations because they feature an oil-free design that has the ability to handle both liquid-transfer and vapor recovery applications.

reliability that it and its customers crave carries the name of Blackmer. "Since we started using Blackmers we very seldom run into a problem; they are very trouble-free," said Bowman. "In an area like ours, Blackmer reliability is a trait that you come to treasure!"

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Making A Difference

There's no question that its location in Michigan's Upper Peninsula means that Bowman Gas is isolated from the rest of the state. But Guy Bowman, following a tradition established by the previous generations that helped build the company into a leading LPG supplier in the U.P., doesn't use that feeling of isolation as an excuse for not getting involved.

How else to explain his – and his family's – long involvement in the Michigan Propane Gas Association (MPGA)?

"Our family businesses became good friends because we have been heavily involved with the state associations," explained Jeff Vandemark, Industrial Propane Service, Inc., Byron, MI, a supplier of service and equipment for the propane industry, and a long-time business partner of Bowman Gas.

Through that relationship, IPS has played a pivotal part in the growth of Bowman Gas, partly through the recommendation of sliding vane pumps and reciprocating gas compressor technology from Blackmer®, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, which IPS has been distributing for more than 40 years.

And as that growth was occurring, Bowman knew that he would have to take an active interest in the Michigan propane market. This interest has manifested itself in a deep connection with the MPGA, whose mission is to promote the proper handling and use of propane in the state, work for a favorable environment for propane distribution and increase its application by demonstrating propane's value as a clean energy source.

To help propagate this mission, Bowman is a past president of the MPGA and is currently serving as the Director of District V, which encompasses the U.P. Additionally, his son, Kris, is 2nd Vice President on the MPGA's Board of Directors, as well as Chairman of the association's Membership and Propane Awareness Day committees.

"The MPGA benefits us a lot. We learn a lot there, and it's very beneficial to be an active member," said Guy Bowman. "Even if you go to a meeting and don't say anything, you still learn a lot from listening to everybody else, which can only help you – and the industry."



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